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ABSTRACT

In an effort to identify characteristics of effective college composition programs, an examination was made of 19 campuses of the California State University. Each English department chair was sent a "fact sheet" requesting program information on such matters as the use of placement test scores, sequence of and prerequisites for lower division writing courses, course staffing, and common course exams, syllabi, texts, or assignments. On a subsample of 10 campuses, interviews were conducted with academic vice presidents, deans, directors of learning centers, English department chairs, composition program coordinators, and remedial program coordinators. Findings revealed several needs, among them (1) program goals that describe student gains from composition coursework; (2) evaluation, retraining, or monitoring of tenured faculty; (3) formal efforts at faculty development; and (4) a commonality provided by the midterm or final exam among course sections taught by the different instructors. (HOD)

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Identifying the Program Variables in College Composition Programs

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Identifying the Program Variables in College Writing Programs[1]

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This presentation describes the difficulties encountered by my colleagues and I in our effort to identify characteristics of effective college composition programs. I will illustrate these issues with findings from the first year's work on our four year investigation.

We have been looking at programs on the nineteen campuses of the California State University, restricting ourselves to this one state system. The nineteen campus sample, in fact, includes most combinations of broad, campus-level characteristics such as: urban and suburban, large and small, predominantly white and ethnically-mixed. On the other hand, the California State University system is rare in its financial and legislative commitment to improvement of student composition skills. For the last six years students applying to any of the nineteen CSU campuses have been required to take a system-wide English Placement Test which includes three multiple choice subtests (sentence construction, logic and organization, and reading) and one writing sample. Campuses receive funds on the basis of the number of students scoring below a common cut-point;

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2 The author would like to thank Frank Capell and Ron Basich for their assistance in questionnaire analyses, and Don Dorr-Bremme and David Rankin for their assistance during analysis of interview transcripts.

however, each campus decides how to spend the "remedial" funds to improve the writing of entering, low-scoring students. In addition to this entering placement test, the CSU system has added a requirement for graduation, upper division certification of writing competence. Unlike the placement test policy, the graduation requirement is not defined by scores on a system-wide exam; there is no such common mechanism. Instead, each campus determines its own procedures for certifying upper division writing skills and its own criteria for defining competence in writing. Also unlike the placement exam, the upper division writing requirement does not have additional funds for either carrying out the new procedure or for "remediating" students who fail to pass. Nevertheless, students are denied diplomas if they have not satisfied this requirement.

Clearly, within this university system , there is a heightened awareness of the importance of writing instruction. Even non-English departments are faced with the real possiblitiy of having their majors denied diplomas if they cannot pass the writing proficiency requirement for graduation. And within the English department, English literature professors find an increased demand for writing classes, a demand which includes instruction at the most basic level for those students whose placement test scores indicate the need for remediation, and in some cases, upper division classes for students facing the graduation requirement. (Also, in some instances, campuses have decided to certify upper division writing competence with an upper division writing class offered by the English department or other departments.)

In many ways, then, we see this nineteen campus state system as an ideal setting in which to study college composition programs, in part because of the representative diversity of its campuses, and in part

because administrators and faculty are now more keenly interested in and troubled by college composition program issues. To investigate these issues and discover effective resolutions, we divided our research into phases. The first phase, completed last year, was a descriptive effort aimed at determining salient program features distinguishing the various campus programs. The second phase, this year's work, is our evaluative effort, aimed at linking those distinguishing characteristics with differences in student writing performance and faculty development. The third phase has been planned for analyses, reflection, and reanalysis. Work from the descriptive phase provides the basis for this presentation.

Data Sources

Our first effort in describing progams focused on obtaining explications of campus policies and procedures in these two areas. We sent each English department chair a "Fact Sheet" asking for program information on matters we suspected were amenable to policy declarations such as the use of placement test scores, sequence of and prerequisites for lower division writing courses, course staffing, and common course exams, syllabi, texts, or assignments.

On a subsample of ten campuses (twelve programs), we interviewed academic vice presidents, deans, directors of learning centers and Educational Opportunity Programs, English department chairs, composition program coordinators, and where they existed, remedial program coordinators. Among other things, we asked these administrators to describe the development of writing program policies that affect all students, using the upper division writing requirement as an example. English chairs and composition program coordinators were further asked about the remedial and freshman composition courses.

Our third source for policy information was the writing faculty on all nineteen campuses. Of the 750 or so instructors teaching lower division required writing courses, 55% returned our faculty questionnaire asking about attitudes and beliefs related to composition instruction and the composition program, and about the relative importance and the predominant reason for particular instructional goals, materials, and methods they used in freshman composition or remedial writing courses.

Our analyses also focused on the descriptive. We considered frequency distributions and formed factors using reponses to questionnaire items, and we created largely nominal descriptive categories from responses to the main topics of the interview protocols. (Additional analyses are being carried out this year).

We began our descriptive analysis with a rather traditional conception of instructional programs. We posed three broad questions we thought would cover the key elements of a program description:

1. What are the goals held by college composition programs?
2. What programmatic activities are implemented, presumably to meet those goals?
3. How do features of the program setting (context) moderate those goals and activities?

Early on we decided to focus our data collection by restricting our definition of composition program to lower division, required writing courses, commonly called "freshman composition," remedial prerequisite instruction, and adjunct writing instruction available outside the classroom (from, e.g., workshops, tutorials, learning centers). We also agreed that we were not interested in individual instructors' classroom practices per se. Instead we chose to focus on programmatic qualities that transcend the individual. Thus, instruction becomes important as one of

many features possibly governed by program guidelines in an effort to establish standard course content, method, or materials.

Our interest in comparability among class sections belies a key assumption underlying our research questions, i.e., that there are such things as programs of instruction at the postsecondary level. At the start of our descriptive data analyses then, we were forced to confront this complex issue. When is a procedure a program policy; when is an activity programmatic? We agreed that we were looking for policy that is: documented, widely communicated, widely followed, and enforceable. These criteria, we felt, would help us distinguish personal beliefs and activities from truly programmatic ones, and would permit us to discover whether or not such systems of instruction exist in our sample of campuses.

Program Goals

We expected to encounter descriptions of traditional student-oriented goals describing essay writing performance. However, recent advances in composition theory and research have expanded traditional notions to include students' awareness of writing processes such as recursive planning and revision, and use of writing as a tool for thinking and learning. We had hopes of finding enlightened goals statements which make reference to new theory.

In fact, the recent great advances in the field of composition coupled with increased demand for composition classes have created a unique situation in which English literature specialists who generally populate English departments are called upon to teach basic college writing courses. To untangle such a paradox, there must be some faculty development (as college level in-service is euphemistically called), and at the very least,

mechanisms for staff to share knowledge and experiences. Accordingly, we were prepared to find faculty-oriented goals of the sort that might best be called intermediary or enabling goals; that is, goals describing changes in faculty knowledge, attitudes, skills, or behaviors deemed necessary to accomplish the desired student outcomes. Further, with the additional upper-division writing requirement for graduation, we thought we might see program goals which included a little consciousness raising for faculty in other departments.

During analysis of our interview transcripts it became clear that serious, well-defined goals statements of any sort are the very rare exception to the general rule of none. Thus, our first category of goals is easily defined as "laissez-faire." Into this category we were able to place most of twelve programs in our interview sample. (example below).

> COORD #1: I hope that one (goals statement) is emerging. And that is, I think, basically what the composition committee has been directing itself to this fall.
>
> INT: Does the department have any kind of, while you're putting together those goals statements, any other kind of guideline for people teaching comp.?
>
> COORD #1: No, there hasn't been. The only guidelines that have existed have been rather general and perfunctory descriptions of the course that appear in the university catalog.
>
> .....
>
> INT: And in [the freshman comp. course], do you include something like a description of the standards you expect students to meet in order to pass that course?
>
> COORD #2: No, we don't. Probably should, but we don't. Our department is so individualistic that they have a hard time agreeing and [there's the] feeling that someone else is going to impose what they are going to do.

Though six of our twelve program coordinators do talk about goals for both remedial and regular composition, when asked by our interviewer, their remarks are at a very general level. (example below)

COORD #3: The only answer I can give to that is to say when I first took the job and I got up to speak to the department about something, somebody raised his hand and said what is your philosophy? What do you want the students to learn? I said, if I want the students to learn anything, I want them to learn to be concrete and specific in their writing. And everybody nodded. So I assume that is the underlying philosophy. I think it is a [given] that we look for reasonable grammar and mechanics and punctuation. That is obvious. I suppose the underlying issue is the student should be clear.

What we had expected was rarely voiced. Few coordinators had clear descriptions of expectations for students completing freshman or remedial instruction. No one mentions student goals other than writing performance. No one includes faculty goals in their program outcomes. Here is the most comprehensive statement we were able to elicit. Its specificity is unique in our sample.

COORD: Yes, there is something in writing. In fact, we have a rather substantial manual which guides the program. This manual orginally was prepared in 1977 by the Composition Committee and it was more recently edited and reduced, updated. It spells out course objectives for freshman composition, and even [remedial]. It suggests textbooks for each of those courses, it spends quite a lot of time suggesting various classroom methods or strategies that instructors might exercise in order to strike writing targets. So yes, there is something in fact quite formal spelling out our philosophy and goals.

In sum, when we ask about program goals, most coordinators are able to talk about desired instructional methods or available sample syllabi or recommended texts, but not student goals. Most of those coordinators who do speak of student outcomes are very general in their descriptions or limit their detailed student objectives to the remedial courses in the program.

It may be the case that it is easier to agree upon and articulate expectations for remedial student writers than for the regular college composition student. It certainly seems to be the case that we need to

think about what it is that college students are supposed to gain from college level writing instruction. This ambiguity, we expect, may come back to haunt the campuses as they struggle to define and implement the required certification of students' upper division writing skills for graduation.

While it is difficult to pinpoint a common characteristic of programs with clear and thorough goals, it is easy to see a shared feature of the others. In each such case the program coordinator describes a resistant staff of tenured (or tenure-tracked) literature professors all less than thrilled with the need for college English departments to teach a general education course in composition, let alone remedial writing. Further, all the coordinators we interviewed reported little knowledge of or control over the classroom practices of tenured faculty who are reportedly rarely, if ever, evaluated as writing instructors. We had anticipated this issue to some extent in our thinking about the implementation of a composition program.

Programmatic Instruction

We looked next at the instructional component of program implementation. Is there comparability among classes taught by different instructors? And, how is this managed? Unfortunately, all but one of our department and program leaders report they do not know what goes on in the classrooms of tenured instructors teaching composition. Tenured faculty are not visited or otherwise systematically monitored or evaluated as writing instructors. In contrast, part-time instructors or full-time lecturers (contract employees) are talked about as if they were a unit or cadre: they are usually hired and trained (or oriented) by the program coordinator, monitored regularly, and often concurrently enrolled in or recently graduated from the newer graduate programs specialized in

composition instruction (examples below).

INT: How well do you feel you know what goes on in composition classes?

COORD #5: I think it's getting better and better. I have to divide that into two. What we know about what's going on in the courses that are taught by part-time faculty is very very good because we have a system of visitations and evaluations, and that also applies to our teaching assistants. ...As far as the full-time (regular) faculty, I would have to tell you that it's [iffy] at best.

.....

COORD #6: Well, I don't know what goes on in the classes of the full-time faculty. And the nature of our faculty here is such that nobody is ever going to know what goes on. Our faculty is very restless with any kind of organization. They don't like to be monitored and won't stand for it. Who knows what goes on in their classes. Only God knows.

I don't have to monitor what goes on in the part-time instructors' classes. I found out a long time ago, years ago, when I was really worried about it. They are homogeneously trained. And their hiring process is so meticulous and thorough that anybody who survives it is automatically guaranteed to be compulsive. And they teach the way they have been taught to teach. They teach what they have been taught to teach. The new instructors have to take an in-service course during the first semester of teaching that has student-faculty ratio of six to one, or lower. And in that course they bring the materials they developed for the [composition] course to the seminar. They share them; they get criticized. They do critiques in the group; they bring their problems to the seminar to be ironed out... During the second semester they are evaluated by the English composition committee; each person is visited by two different commitee members and so on. We have run into instances in which, although not very many, in which instructors have decided that despite everything they are really going to go their own way. And that usually turns up in their evaluations. ...And if we are not able to work with the instructor and bring them around, we fire them.

These two excerpts are good representatives of comments we heard from almost all composition coordinators. In particular, references to

careful hiring, class visits, orientation or formal training sessions, handouts of course guidelines or sample syllabi, and the use of recommended texts lists, are found in all descriptions of part-timers' classrooms. However, also omnipresent in coordinators' comments are confessions of ignorance about what the regular faculty are up to. We might wonder if this isn't a strawman issue; why should regular faculty necessarily need monitoring? And, how can we find out at least the basic orientation of their writing course instruction?

In this study, we relied upon our survey questionnaire to help us determine what the regulars are thinking, and whether as a group they are different in terms of instructional themes or goals underlying instruction, materials important to that instruction, classroom arrangements, instructional methods, and kind and amount of writing assignments, among other things. We carefully constructed our items to allow for a variety of common approaches to surface, and we are gratified to find that, through our factor analysis of questionnaire reponses, we can identify six distinct instructional factors (HANDOUT CONTAINS FACTOR TABLES) which appear to be reflective of (1) the literature teacher - intent upon exposing students to good literature, seemingly as models of good writing; (2) the composing process teacher - a keen believer in lots of opportunities for students to write and review their writing; (3) the rhetorical modes teacher - closely related perhaps to the composing process teacher, but different in a reliance upon learning from prose models and rhetorical texts; (4) the basic skills teacher - hopefully the remedial course instructor, concerned with correct expression in student writing; (5) the workshop teacher - very much like the composing process teacher, though seemingly more focused on the instructional method than specific skills and materials; (6) the service course teacher - perceiving the required composition coursework as

preparation for writing in other college courses, and other college writing as primarily term or research papers.

This coming summer we will be able to complete our analyses and determine into which instructional categories these part-timers and regular faculty fall. Nevertheless, this distinction in the program coordinators' knowledge of and influence over part-timers and regular faculty is a serious complication for the evaluation of any composition program where both sorts of instructors are used.

If monitoring and evaluation of regular faculty teaching writing is a near impossibility, what means are available to composition program coordinators for assuring enlightened and comparable instruction in those instructors' classes? Aside from relying upon part-timers then, how can a program develop an instructional staff that shares enough information and interest to maintain a state-of-the-art common core of curricula and instructional methods in composition?

Faculty Development

People working in the world of college composition programs use the term, "faculty development," to refer to an entire range of activities whose goals are to help ease the transition for the literature-trained faculty members in English departments (or in other departments which offer writing instruction) who must now function as writing class instructors. These activities can be as marginal as circulating a research article or as vigorous as a required graduate seminar in composition theory.

For the most part, all our interviewees describe the reluctance and even occasional adamant refusal of regular tenured and tenure-tracked faculty to take on lower division writing class instruction. Composition

program coordinators, then, find themselves in a position in which they must ease this situation and attempt to up-grade or ensure instructional quality by offering in-services, i.e., retraining literature faculty for their expanded role. Ironically, because of the recent burgeoning interest in writing instruction as a legitimate field of study, many part-time instructors who are new M. A. graduates are often much better informed about writing theory and often even trained in teaching writing. This can further strain the relationship between regular tenured faculty and the writing program in which they must participate.

In our interviews we asked composition coordinators and department chairs about their faculty development efforts, recent and on-going, in the field of composition theory. They describe a variety of methods but report little success; that is, when success is defined as reaching the regular faculty members, which is how all our interviewees talk about it, every administrator reports difficulty (examples below):

ENG CHAIR #1: We have an informal luncheon meeting called "comp. meetings" held perhaps once every six weeks in which we, as a faculty, are to read an article and discuss it. Or have an individual faculty member come and discuss an article on which he may be working, on composition. Or which he has read and wished to use as a focal point for an hour, an hour and a half discussion. In that sense, refining faculty understanding of the composition field.

INT: Are those well attended?

ENG CHAIR: Often the people who attended the meeting and are most interested are also, of course, those who know the most about it. And those who need it the most are nowhere to be seen.

.....

COORD #1: We have occasionally had, and would like to have now, some kind of seminars or get-together...we will try to have one or two a semester. We don't always.

INT: What kind of response do you get from the faculty?

COORD: Not strong.

.....

INT: And is it correct to say that what you've been saying is that the part-timers are very ready to [meet about grading essays] and it's kind of tough to get the others to join?

COORD #2: That's pretty accurate. And the others, they take the time to say "I'd really like to come to that and I can't." And I think part of it is that conflict in their souls between composition and literature. They say, "Look, I'm going to give just so much time a week to composition. I believe in it; teaching is an important thing, but I'm not going to that discussion session. It's too much of my time." ...Oh they'd love to know in two seconds what happened at that discussion session. But they don't want to take that hour and a half.

Some coordinators report more relatively more success than others. For the most part, the more successful formal faculty development efforts use one of two approaches: (1) mandatory, enforced prerequisite coursework in composition before assignment to teaching composition; or, (2) socially contexted "meetings" for which composition topics and materials are prepared ahead, but which are not overtly designated as faculty development. It is important to note that the two programs with prerequisite coursework are campuses with graduate masters programs in the teaching of composition, and that the required course is one of the degree program's core seminars. Not all campuses, in fact, relatively few, have such degree programs to draw upon. Further, the successful socially-contexted retraining events are found in very small programs, in one instance, in an ethnic studies department which has its own separate but equally accepted composition program.

It does seem clear that direct efforts to solve the problem of faculty retraining in composition are invariably unsuccessful. It is not hard to figure out a key source of this resistance: until recently, composition was a service performed the English department for the benefit of the

campus and the English department's own graduate students who were employed to teach the course. In short, it has been a task without academic recognition or reward.

Though it sounds like a losing battle, faculty development for regular faculty need not be; we have discovered a very simple event that succeeds in drawing all writing instructors, regular and part-time, and getting them to interact on the subject of composition instruction. A key additional benefit accrues to this event: establishing some comparability in instruction across classes taught by these different faculty members.

This successful process is simply instructor group scoring of common student essays, whether the common essay is system-wide (as in the placement test writing sample for which readers are solicited from all nineteen campuses a couple of times a year), campus-wide (as in the case of essay exams certifying students' writing competence for graduation), or departmental writing tests. Those coordinators heading programs where common essay gradings are a policy, talk about positive side benefits of the process: (1) interaction between part-time and regular faculty, (2) opportunities for discussion of composition theory and instructional methods, and as a consequence of these experiences, (3) increased comparability across course sections taught by different instructors, and (4) reports of changes in class instruction, e.g., more in-class writing. The following quotations come from the same composition coordinator, first, when he is asked about faculty development opportunities, second, when asked about his knowledge of the classroom practices of both part-timers and regular faculty teaching writing.

> COORD #3: Well, we did that for years. When I first started, we did that constantly...Where we would beg people to come, browbeat them, invite them, plead with them, bribe them with wine and cheese, and do everything we could to get them to come and listen to some of our best people talk

about everything from minor problems, to grading techniques, to massive theories of composition.

...the final examination allows a great deal of that to occur, not just for being able to go back over and work with the statistics and the calculator, but the committee work that comes prior to that, working with people and setting up the topics, talking about the theory of composition. They bring in topics, possible topics. You learn something about it; you make comments and make an effect on people and vice versa. "You can't make students write on that." Also the reading sessions, where you spend a whole day with all your comp. staff, at every level and they're talking about composition, that's the focus. And prior to that, everybody went his own separate way and you never really, you really didn't know what was going on.

...There's an example of how you can affect your individuals, including brand new part-time people, on the basis of something like a (common) final exam. We have a prewriting segment built in to the final exam where they (students) may not write in their books, their blue books, for half an hour. People who may never have heard of prewriting before, it's hard to believe nowadays, we inform them in the beginning of the semester what the exam is all about.

Remedial Writing Instruction

The CSU system is not alone in its dilemma of underprepared entering freshmen, but the system-wide English Placement Test and the special funds tied to student scores on that test, imply that the CSU intends to accept responsibility for remediating student deficiencies in writing skills. The lattitude given campuses in the expenditure of remedial funds has resulted in some variety in the implementation of this remediation policy. Nevertheless, it seems clear that all campuses regard this task as an English department task.

We did not want to simply document the implementation of remedial writing instruction; we believe such a description misses a key issue that probably affects how that instruction is implemented. How does the English

faculty, and the campus administration, feel about this obligation? We asked this question directly, in our interviews and questionnaire.

Academic vice presidents and deans of schools (within which the English departments reside) were fairly consistent in their expression of dismay tempered by a recognition of the inevitable. In a few instances, these adminstrators expressed concerns about the growing numbers of students who need remedial work, not just in English, before they can profit from the regular college coursework. Some of these campus administrators also suggest the community colleges as a way out of the expanding basic skills instructional programs; the idea being to require underprepared students to put in some instructional time at the local junior college before entering the state university. But, for the most part, there is acquiescence among those in our inteview sample.

> DEAN OF HUMANITIES: I don't even know if I have an option any more, but I have this slight paranoia, and that is. There are really two colleges at every college. One is the official college, which is in the catalog, and it's all the courses that you and I have been talking about. And then the other college is the college of skills. ...Well, when you get to know the students involved, you obviously don't have an objective view of remediation...from a lofty standpoint, you say, "Of course not; it's beneath college; it's really high school level stuff." Then you get to know the students and their commitments and their motivations, especially minority students, and you just can't take that lofty position.
>
> .....
>
> ACADEMIC VICE PRESIDENT: On the one hand, I feel good about the fact that students who are admitted and lack basic skills will be given an opportunity to learn them. Because if they don't then this impedes their progress and we have a revolving door situation. They come in and they lack basic skills; we don't give them to them and they're out. On the other hand, I think it's a shame that we have to.
>
> ...whether we should be doing them or the community colleges should be doing them, I think is a separate question. But if we're ging to allow the students to come here,then it's obvious we're going to have a remedial writing program.

We obtained a glimpse of the faculty perspective from responses to likert from responses to likert items on the questionnaire. From these responses we were able to generate a series of factors, one of which contained our items on remedial instruction. However, these were not the only questionnaire items which form the remediation factor. It appears that we managed to tap into an attitude factor that describes faculty feelings toward teaching composition in general, including remedial. (HANDOUT CONTAINS FACTOR TABLES) Consider these items, all of which group on the same factor:

> Generally speaking, in this department tenured and tenure-track instructors do NOT need review or coordination of their writing instruction.
>
> I'm NOT likely to attend meetings designed to improve my writing instruction, e.g., faculty development or "retraining" sessions.
>
> Had I the choice, I would never teach undergraduate writing courses.
>
> Students who are not prepared to do college level writing should NOT be admitted to this campus.
>
> College resources should NOT support remedial programs in writing.
>
> Much of what I've hear about "writing as process" strikes me as yet another fad in the field of composition instruction.
>
> In every composition class I've taught here, I've finally had to admit to myself that most students do not improve their writing very much by the end of a single school term.

This pattern of related responses suggests to us that feelings about the remediation of student writers are bound up with feelings about teaching composition. We expect programs with reluctant writing faculty might also be those with the least well-developed remedial offerings; that is, that attitudes affect implementation. Our interview analyses suggest just that.

At one end of a spectrum of programmatic remediation we find a campus where the English department eschews remedial coursework. Students

identified as remedial are placed into regular freshman composition classes, and tutors are provided in each class. The English department chair relies on the learning assistance center to supply trained tutors. With the additional in-class instructional aid, the English chair is able to increase class size, thus decreasing the number of writing sections that must be staffed by literature faculty, and precluding the need for any English faculty to teach remedial or basic writing. Foreign students needing remedial assistance find themselves in a linguistics department course.

At the other extreme there are programs offering coursework which the coordinators themselvses "pre-remedial" and providing adjunct assistance for the better remedial students by enrolling them in a composition section that is specifically set aside for these lower level students.

Often under the guidance of a remedial program coordinator, many of the programs in this group have aligned their pre-remedial course continuum with the content of the multiple choice subtests of the English Placement Test, i.e., offering courses in reading, sentence construction, and logic and organization, and placing students on the basis of their subtest scores. (In two instances, remedial readers are referred to a reading course offered by the education department.) In interviews with these remedial coordinators we find a great deal of specificity in descriptions of course content, methods, materials, and goals, and instructor preparation.

About half of the programs in our interview sample provide these pre-remedial courses of instruction; an overlapping group, again about half, choose to rely on a separate remedial course rather than on special composition course sections augmented by tutors. Two of these programs provide for common midterm or final exams; but for the most part, unlike

the pre-remedial, we find little in the way of mechanisms for ensuring much commonality among remedial course instructors.

Perhaps most interesting is the role, or rather the lack of participation, of tenured faculty in the remedial and pre-remedial coursework. We find only one program with significant involvement of tenured faculty (oddly, one of the two polytechnical campuses). Other than that, it is strictly part-timers and the lone tenured faculty member who is serving as the remedial program coordinator.

Campus Climate for Writing Instruction

In planning our investigation of writing programs, we recognized the potential for outside sources to influence composition program operations. Obviously the larger, English department context needs to be accounted for; but also, we believe there are opportunities for campus level factors to affect programs. This is one of the main reasons we interviewed academic vice presidents, deans, and directors of special programs and learning assistance centers. We also asked faculty to rate a number of department variables in terms of the kind (positive/negative) and amount (strong/moderate/none) of influence these variables exert upon the composition program, and we included likert items on campus characteristics.

From the faculty responses to these items we were able to create seven program context factors, each describing a different aspect of the world in which composition programs operate. (FACTOR TABLES ARE INCLUDED IN HANDOUTS.) The first three factors relate to the campus at large: (1) campus climate surrounding composition matters, (2) adjunct writing

assistance (available outside of the classroom), (3) student characteristics. The first factor includes faculty feelings about placement policy for entering students and policy for certifying upper division writing competence. The second describes typical outside resources, such as the learning center and EOP services. This factor also accounts for the impact of faculty from other departments teaching writing in the English department, and the recent composition theory, as influences on the program. These last two variables may reflect campus involvement in the upper-division writing requirement as non-English department faculty are trained to teach upper-division courses for their student majors.

The third factor, student characteristics, includes a number of questionnaire items describing student language characteristics (dialect and second language problems), general perceptions of the quality of the student population as a whole, and a related variable, the influence of writing assistance provided by the EOP. In additon there are two faculty characteristics items which loaded on this factor: general faculty morale (in the deparment) and the presence of tenured and tenure-track faculty in the composition instructor pool. We are a little surprised to find these last two variables grouped with these student items. However, it may be that those who view tenured faculty involvement as having somewhat of a negative influence on the program are also the people who are somewhat demoralized by the language obstacles facing their writing class students.

The rest of our program factors focus more closely upon the composition program itself. Factor four includes likert items asking about the quality of the working relationship among staff and the accessibility of the composition coordinator. Five items from our questions on program influences are grouped with these likerts. Three of those items concern various sources of leadership in composition: the composition program

coordinator, the English department chair, and the composition committee. The other two items are faculty morale and training in composition instruction. We find it reasonable to expect that faculty morale has a positive influence on programs where leadership is also perceived positively and where faculty perceive themselves as trained and able to approach their program leader and colleagues on the subject of compostion instruction.

The next factor describes mechanisms for establishing and maintaining a "program" of instruction in composition: agreed upon standards for grading, for curricula, and for methods. These influence of these variables is viewed similarly by our faculty sample, whether negative or positive.

The last two factors are, I believe, the most fascinating. I have labeled them as 6a and 6b becasue of the obvious similarity in attitudinal territory they map. Nevertheless, these factors come from the same factor analysis run and thus describe two distinct patterns of responses in our faculty sample. The first, 6a, groups only likert items, and in particular, what we have been calling our "bah humbug" items. They are all worded in the negative and describe what might best be called a keen desire to avoid any active involvement in composition instruction. Of course, it is most important to remember that it may be everyone's common <u>disagreement</u> with these items that unites them. The second related factor, 6b, also includes primarily likert items. In this case they are the "good guy" items; they describe all those good sentiments we would hope to find among dedicated composition instructors, and seem to describe what we might call "level of commitment" to writing instruction. The interesting aspect of this factor is that it manages to draw faculty who also value one or both

of two particular instructional themes: teaching editing skills and teaching invention (prewriting) skills. If we allow that these goals are among the those more closely related to current composition theory, we are not surprised to find these items grouped with "dedication" items. Even our interiew data suggest that there are some faculty members who are seriously interested in composition theory and instruction.

We eagerly await the results of our on-going analyses using these factors to characterize individual programs and faculty groups. We wonder whether or not the part-timer/tenured distinction will reappear in these analyses.

The Upper Division Writing Requirement

Our interview data on the upper division writing competency requirement offer additional insight into the level of campus commitment to and involvement in college composition, for here is a policy that affects every department offering a degree. Students who do not pass the requirement do not receive their degree, and it will be easy for campus adminstration to tell which departments have the greatest problem graduating their majors under the new requirement. Clearly there is an incentive here for each department to become informed about, if not involved in, the creation and implementation of the campus certification policy.

We find we can account for all varieties of policy with just three categories of certification method. The first requires students to take an essay exam (sometimes with an objective subtest); the second provides a choice between exam or approved course; the third method requires certification through approved courses only, no exam option. Those

campuses with test-only policy allow students to retake the test if they do not pass the first time. Most administrators we spoke with are reluctant to put a ceiling on the number of times this may be done. The most popular method (six of ten campuses) is the second method, allowing students to choose either the test or one of a number of acceptable courses. In some cases there is a planned overlap between the two options such that students may "test out" of the course part way through the school term, or may end up in the course as a direct consequence of failing the test. The remaining category, course only, is used on only one campus.

Potentially each of these three methods allows for the involvement of faculty and administrators outside the English department. We find in our interviews that, depending upon who is committed and to what extent, the writing requirement can be an enriching and unifying experience, or a genuine pain in the neck. Largely the initiative for involving others lies with the Egnlish department which is seen as the source of resident experts on writing instruction and evaluation of writing skill. And the opportunity for the English department to seek outside involvement arises in the campus literacy committee.

We found such committees on all but one campus, and on that one campus the upper division requirement, a writing test, is solely the department's responsibility. The department composition committee formulates the test question and administers the test. The composition coordinator explains: "There was a writing committee for the university and it proved to be unworkable and was disbanded." On two other campuses the upper division requirement is also the exclusive domain of the English department. In both cases the impression given in the interviews is that this subject is their area of expertise and they intend to see that the requirement is appropriate and enforced.

Two other campuses also leave sole responsibility to the English department, though in both these cases it is a result of inaction on the part of the English department. In one instance, the department chair describes his deliberate refusal to participate on the campus-wide literacy committee and then later, in the same interview, talks about how the campus committee has decided to let each department select a suitable course and how all the other departments have selected the Englihs department's designated course, placing a tremendous enrollment burden on the department staff.

Only two campuses in our sample are actively pursuing campus-wide involvement and responsibility for the upper division requirement. Both rely upon specified upper division courses which, if approved, may be non-English department courses. In one case these students in the diverse approved courses must all take a common essay exam, graded by the group of course instructors from the diverse departments. As described in the section on faculty development, when these course instructors meet to grade the common essays, a good deal of faculty development takes place, ılightening the non-English department faculty about writing instruction. In some ways then, coures may be deemed acceptable for the upper division requirement with a little less anxiety than if there were no such "quality control" mechanism. The second campus in this elite group takes the opposite approach, rigorous committee scrutiny of proposed courses. As the compostion coordinator admits, relatively few courses outside the English deparmtnet have been accepted, in part because the acceptance relies on the availability of an instructor who has been approved by the English department. Department approval rests on the completion of one of the graduate courses in composition offered by the department as part of its

masters program in composition.

Summary and Conclusion

It is difficult to summarize the vast amount of diverse descriptive information we have uncovered and made sense of. It may not even be an appropriate activity when the research focus has been descriptive. We will need to see if any of these program features do in fact make a substantial difference in student performance and attitudes, or in faculty behaviors and attitudes, though in this latter case it already appears clear that we will find such differences.

As my colleagues and I worked on integrating and reducing our tremendous amount of archival, interview, and questionnaire data, several issues presented themselves. Issues which I hope have arisen in my presentation of findings here. Rather than summarize program descriptions then, I would like to return to a few of those issues.

Consciousness Raising. For me, the most pressing issue in research or evaluation of postsecondary composition programs is the goals issue, or rather, the lack-of-goals issue. We simply do not find program goals, aims, or purposes which describe student gains resulting from composition coursework. On rare occasions we find vague descriptions of remedial coursework goals, most often defined in terms of ability to profit from regular composition course instruction. But what about students in the regular course?

It strikes me that the creation of formal remedial coursework is

relatively new on the postsecondary scene, whereas freshman composition has been a standard general education requirement for a good deal longer. Also, almost as a derivative of that need for remedial instruction at the college level, there has been a recent explosion of research and theory on composition isntruction. Indeed, many of the seminal works in the new "writing as process" field were conducted with college students, ano often by college professors or program administrators responsible for that instruction. It makes sense then, that this new research has been applied in the development of remedial writing programs, programs not yet locked into tradition, programs often accompanied by special funds, programs still amenable to experimentation. On the other hand, the standard freshman composition course stands before us as "complete;" it hasn't failed us, so why should we tamper with it? We have not been confronted with its failure, as we have with the failure of college preparatory high school English. We have not scrutinized its workings or thought much about its purposes beyond filling the GE requirement.

It is no wonder that, in our examination of college writing programs, we have not found many sites with program goals or cohesive sequential curricula. There simply has been no incentive or perceived need to consider or reconsider writing coursework as a program of instruction; it was just a GE requirement, a service the English department carried out for the college. And remedial instruction is a separate entity by virtue of its newness, its funding, its no-graduation-credit status, its students. For those English faculty interested in the new composition theory, remedial instruction offers an opportunity to try out new ideas.

Thus, our first issue in composition program research and evaluation is whether or not we have set our sights too high in looking for program goals, and whether the evaluation of a program in terms of meeting its

goals is equally premature. Perhaps we ought to be uncovering descriptions of successful "consciousness raising," not just in terms of campus-wide interest and enlightenment, but also in terms of the English department faculty perspective on composition. In fact, when we re-examine our own sample of campuses, we find that this approach reveals much more to us. In this university system, that "consciousness-raising" is being pushed along by a strong incentive, the upper division writing competency requirement for graudation. We find evidence that the way in which a campus (and English department) deals with that requirement reflects both the programmatic nature of its lower division writing courses, and the relative interest and knowledge on the part of English and non-English faculty.

Common Essay Readings. A second, related issue that arises from our work concerns the writing faculty. We have found the distinction between part-time contract instructors and regular tenured faculty omnipresent. Not only in terms of categories we generated and used in our work, but also in the descriptions offered by composition program coordinators. We detect a bias, based upon an as yet unfounded assumption, i.e., that tenured faculty know less about new writing theory. And, we find corollary assumptions, e.g., that tenured faculty are less competent writing instructors, that they need "re-training," that they need to be monitored or evaluated.

At the same time, we find inequities in the opportunities for part-timers to participate in program decision-making. We find real limits to the extent of program coordinators' authority and power of persuasion over regular faculty. We find few assurances and fewer mechanisms for assuring a common core of curriculum and instructional methods for composition courses. Thus it appears that the staffing of composition courses greatly

affects the likelihood of establishing and maintaining that elusive "program of instruction" we have been seeking.

Our data indicate that formal attempts to unite the part-timers and tenured instructors, formal attempts at faculty development in the field of composition, documents prescribing course content, sequence, recommended texts, all do not succeed. Nevertheless, amongst our checklist of program features we found a diamond in the rough, the common midterm or final essay exam. Where remedial or regular composition courses have common essays, we find interaction between part-timers and tenured, informational gains on the part of the uninformed, reported impact on actual classroom practices, and ultimately greater commonality among course sections taught by the different instructors. However, it also appears that what makes this activity so successful is its subtlety. It is not perceived as faculty retraining, nor as a means of standardizing course content and instructional methods.

In short, it appears that the common exam operates as the perfect "consciousness raising" activity. We find this phenomenon can also occur outside the English department for campuses whose upper division writing requirement specifies a common exam across various departments' certification courses.

Recommendations to Researchers and Evaluators

I would like to draw these points together into some coherent set of recommendations for present and future investigations of college writing programs. My first recommendation is to keep in mind the incredible presumption we all hold, that English literature professors should be seriously interested college composition, which has heretofore been a service course, a general education requirement, much like music

appreciation. Accordingly, I warn, watch for the impact of corollary assumptions in your study focus and methods: expectations of and searches for faculty knowledge about composition theory; and, concern for documenting instructional content, methods, and materials, as indicators of that knowledge transformed into practice.

My second recommendation is to consider the campus in which the program operates. Not so much for the influence of characteristics such as minority group enrollments or campus size, but for the presence of campus policies affecting writing instruction, for alternative sources of instruction in composition, for non-English department faculty involvement in writing instruction, for campus administrator support of writing programs and policies.

My third recommendation is to abandon any notions of ranking or ordinal measures for describing programs. We have finally recognized that our attempts to do so resulted in lots of binary variables. Things existed or they didn't. Often, activities or structures that exist on any one campus are not found on any other. That is, we find our descriptions involve nominal categories; we can distinguish types of activities which are grouped together by virtue of their focus. For instance, there are many different versions of formal faculty development; but, distinctions among the approaches are simply different "ways of doing," not more or less, or longer or shorter, versions of the same basic approach.

This presentation has exposed only the tip of our iceberg mass of data from year one. You may wish to write us for the more complete reports, and we welcome your reactions.

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Identifying the Program Variables in College Composition Programs

HANDOUTS ACCOMPANYING PRESENTATION

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RESULTS OF FACTOR ANALYSES ON PROGRAM VARIABLES
FROM ITEMS ON FACULTY QUESTIONNAIRE*

Factor 1: CAMPUS CLIMATE FOR COMPOSITION

questionnaire item (communality)	factor loading
likert items:	
the upper division writing requirement for graduation on this campus is meaningful & appropriate (.47)	.61
the upper division writing requirement for graduation has promoted interest in comp. campus-wide (.54)	.67
on this campus, method of placing students in regular remedial comp. is accurate (.42)	.46
influences on comp. program:	
the English Placement Test (.44)	.38
eigenvalue = 1.0	

Factor 2: STUDENT CONTEXT

questionnaire item (communality)	factor loading
influences on program:	
faculty morale (.45)	.36
academic services sponsored by EOP (.50)	.38
regular tenured & tenure-track faculty teaching composition (.39)	.37
caliber of students on this campus (.60)	.71
number of students on campus who are not native speakers of English (.86)	.89
number of students on this campus who experience second dialect interference in their writing (.85)	.88
the English Placement Test for freshman and transfers (.44)	.36
eigenvalue = 9.4	

Factor 3: ADJUNCT WRITING INSTRUCTION

questionnaire item (communality)	factor loading
likert items:	
writing instruction by tutors or in the learning center/writing lab is useful & effective (.47)	.60
influences on comp. program:	
recent comp. theory & research (.50)	.36
academic services sponsored by EOP (.50)	.43
the learning center, tutoring center, writing lab, or other support services (.50)	.63
faculty from other departments (who are) teaching comp. in the English department (.52)	.37

eigenvalue = 1.3

Factor 4: PROGRAM LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

questionnaire item (communality)	factor loading
likert items:	
cooperative & supportive relationship among writing staff (.47)	.46
can freely discuss ideas & problems with comp. program coordinator (.46)	.51
influences on program:	
training in teaching comp. (.46)	.38
faculty morale (.45)	.38
the composition coordinator (.76)	.80
the composition committee (.72)	.70
the English department chair (.50)	.54

eigenvalue = 3.5

Factor 5: COHESIVENESS OF COMPOSITION PROGRAM

questionnaire item (communality)	factor loading
influences on comp. program:	
agreed upon standards for grading in comp. classes (.68)	.68
formal or informal agreement among instructors about comp. course curricula (.80)	.81
formal or informal agreement among instructors about instructional methods for comp. courses (.82)	.80

eigenvalue = 2.0

continued, next page

Factor 6a: ATTITUDES TOWARD COMPOSITION

questionnaire item (communality)	factor loading
likert items:	
tenured & tenure-track instructors do NOT need review or coordination of their instruction (.42)	.35
I'm NOT likely to attend faculty development sessions to improve my comp. instruction (.46)	.52
Had I the choice, I'd never teach undergraduate writing courses (.88)	.66
Precollege level writers should not be admitted (.44)	.63
College resources should NOT support remedial writing instructional programs (.43)	.63
"Writing as process" strikes me as yet another fad (.60)	.58
Students don't improve their writing much in one school term (.31)	.49
eigenvalue = 1.7	

Factor 6b: ATTITUDES TOWARD COMPOSITION

questionnaire item (communality)	factor loading
likert items:	
comp. instruction requires more preparation than my other courses do (.27)	.43
I've tried out new comp. instruction ideas suggested by colleagues (.45)	.52
student evaluations from my comp. courses should effect retention or promotion (.52)	.35
concern with students' feelings is legitimate part of comp. instruction (.38)	.50
I have fairly good sense of what is going on in other comp. instructors' classes (.29)	.39
instructional themes:	
teaching editing skills (.24)	.39
teaching invention skills, e.g., prewriting (.35)	.41
eigenvalue = 1.2	

RESULTS OF FACTOR ANALYSES ON INSTRUCTIONAL ITEMS
FROM FACULTY QUESTIONNAIRE*

Factor 1: THE LITERATURE APPROACH

questionnaire item (communality)	Factor Loading
instructional theme:	
to expose students to good literature (.56)	.70
instructional materials:	
poetry & fiction anthologies (.66)	.68
poetry, fiction, & non-fiction anthologies (.49)	.64
individual works of literature (.55)	.71
class activities:	
analyzing literature (.69)	.82
analyzing prose models of composition (.49)	.35

eigenvalue = 6.0

Factor 2: THE COMPOSING PROCESS APPROACH

questionnaire item (communality)	Factor Loading
instructional theme:	
to teach invention skills, such as planning, prewriting, clustering, heuristics (.33)	.42
to provide regular in-class writing in a workshop setting (.58)	.37
instructional materials:	
students' own writing (.24)	.42
classroom arrangements:	
simultaneous small group activities, during which I circulate among the working groups (.56)	.66
class activities:	
free writing or journal writing (.43)	.52
students discussing or scoring their own writing (.57)	.72
students working with other students (.71)	.82

eigenvalue = 4.2

FACTOR ANALYSIS TABLES CONT.

Factor 3: THE RHETORICAL MODES APPROACH

questionnaire item (communality)	Factor Loading
instructional theme:	
to proceed developmentally through discourse modes from, e.g., description to persuasion (.38)	.51
instructional materials:	
non-fiction anthology (.43)	.63
rhetoric text or style book, without handbook (.50)	.49
rhetoric text or style book, handbook included (.40)	.56
class activities:	
working on or discussing material in texts on composition (.50)	.61
analyzing prose models of composition (.49)	.56
eigenvalue = 2.5	

Factor 4: THE BASIC SKILLS APPROACH

questionnaire item (communality)	Factor Loading
instructional theme:	
to teach for competence with basic units of prose, e.g., phrase, sentence, paragraph (.35)	.51
to teach correct grammar and usage (.53)	.69
instructional materials:	
grammar and usage handbook (.34)	.46
class activities:	
discussing mechanics and standard usage (.52)	.65
eigenvalue = 1.8	

FACTOR ANALYSIS TABLES, CONT.

factor 5: THE WORKSHOP APPROACH

questionnaire item (communality)	Factor Loading
instructional theme:	
to allow for frequent in-class writing (.67)	.79
to provide regular in-class writing in a workshop setting (.58)	.59
classroom arrangements:	
individual work, permitting me to circulate among working students (.45)	.47
class activities:	
writing essays on a given topic (.31)	.50
working with tutors during class (.47)	.41
eigenvalue = 1.4	

Factor 6: THE SERVICE COURSE APPROACH

questionnaire item (communality)	Factor Loading
instructional theme:	
to practice writing activities necessary for success in other college courses, e.g., term papers (.56)	.65
kinds of writing assigmments:	
writing a term paper or research paper (.64)	.74
class activities:	
discussing techniques for writing research papers (.71)	.76
eigenvalue = 1.3	

*NOTE: Of all the variables in the factor analysis run only those with factor loadings equal to or greater than .35 are included on these tables.